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## **The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda**

The memory of the 1994 genocide overshadows the present in Rwanda. The landscape is marked with burial and memorial sites, and April has become a month of mourning with national genocide commemorations held annually. The genocide memorials have been sanctioned and promoted by the state, but they are also the product of initiatives by genocide survivors. This article argues that survivors have made substantial and distinctive contributions to memorialisation in Rwanda. It explores a survivor politics of memory and its relationship to trauma and grief.

The memory of genocide is being preserved in an array of institutions and rituals in Rwanda, at a time when the consequences of the atrocities in 1994 still affect survivors and shape social and political relations. The first annual national commemoration was held in Kigali in 1995. Since then, remembrance ceremonies, activities, memorial sites and museums have proliferated. The memorials are part of a state led endeavour to promote a collective identity in a nation torn apart by genocide. Public remembrance is typically a means for national elites to cultivate a shared understanding of the past and to construct political legitimacy; in Rwanda the ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (the RPF) seeks to employ it to this end. However, the memorials are not only a tool to serve political interests; they are also shaped by the distinct concerns of Rwanda's genocide survivors, the largest group of active contributors to the manufacture of genocide memorials.

There are ways in which Rwanda's genocide memorials, and especially the annual commemorations, are shaped by RPF interests. Memory is neither plural, nor openly contested. The post genocide state has a dominant role in setting limits on whose lives are to be remembered publicly and how. At official commemorations RPF leaders justify their policies and lambast their critics, while demanding public participation (Vidal 2001). Talk about the genocide is constrained by legislation to outlaw the expression of 'divisionism' and 'genocide ideology' with harsh, sometimes arbitrary, punishments (Human Rights Watch 2008: 42). Some victims are forgotten, 'erased from the national imagination' (Burnet 2009: 91), the victims of war crimes and

‘vengeance killings’ blamed on the RPF are not remembered publicly (Brauman et al 2000), while the memory of thousands of Hutus killed in the genocide is being sidelined. An apparent ‘Tutsification of the genocide’ (Prunier 2009: 3) seems to add weight to perceptions that the RPF, with its origins among Tutsi exiles, is ‘thwarting’ the memory of Hutu resisters (Lemarchand 2009: 103) and rewriting the past (Pottier 2002).<sup>1</sup> However, the fact that Tutsi survivors have sometimes been marginalised by state interventions (Vidal 2001: 45) indicates that concerns about power, not identity, predominate.

While there are existing insights into the use of commemoration by political elites (Vidal 2001; Cameron 2003), relatively little has been written on the role of survivors or the dynamic of resistance in memorialisation. Yet we know from studies of memorialisation elsewhere that civic involvement matters politically. States do not exercise a monopoly on the politics of memory, which is practiced by diverse groups in various times and places, sometimes becoming ‘insurrectionary and counter-hegemonic’ (Edkins 2003: 54). In previous studies of post-genocide Rwanda we can find examples of tacit resistance from Rwandans who resent the focus on the past (Prunier 2009: 4), of Hutu survivors who want recognition for their suffering (Burnet 2009: 90) and of Tutsi survivors who want to mourn privately without interference from the state (Vidal 2001). There are also accounts of opposition to official representations of the past from a minority who deny the genocide (Lemarchand 2009: 102). Given historical social fractures, the high levels of popular participation in the genocide and identities wrought by violence, resistance to the dominant politics of memory is to be expected. As Longman and Rutagengwa find views and experiences of genocide are complex and attitudes towards commemoration are not necessarily determined by ethnicity; Rwanda ‘presents an interesting case study of the limits of a government’s ability to shape the collective memory of a population’ (2006: 243).

Although the RPF hegemony over popular memory is in question, its dominance over the construction of public memory is generally assumed to be secure. But resistance to a state monopoly over the past comes from within the process as well as in response to it. There are differences of opinion within the state about genocide memory and international donors and NGOs have a significant role, whether by sponsoring or

becoming directly involved in creating memorials (Ibreck, 2009). In particular, survivors have consistently struggled to create their own memorials and to influence other public representations of genocide memory. Survivors have been involved in developing national and local memorials at their own initiative, in partnership, or in parallel with the state, and bring their own ambitions and approaches to this task.

The article argues that survivors and relatives of the dead in Rwanda resist state appropriations of their experiences and losses through contributions to the construction of genocide memory. It begins with a conceptualisation of the politics of memory and the role of survivors within it, with reference to comparative studies. It then turns to the experiences of survivors in Rwanda, firstly outlining the context of the 1994 genocide, and its aftermath, secondly explaining the approach and the research focus on civic groups actively engaged in memorialisation. The next section begins the analysis of the role of survivors in Rwanda's memorialisation process. Based on interviews with key informants it traces the history of survivor involvement in memorialisation; discusses remembrance activities in which they have been engaged; and uncovers their motivations. It finds that survivors are driven by grief and trauma and by a belief that safeguarding the memory of the genocide is an essential step towards political and social transformation in Rwanda.

## **Memory Politics**

Memorials tend to be conceptualized either as tools of politics and nationalism, or as expressions of mourning, according to Ashplant et al (2004: 6). The former perspective informs most accounts of commemoration in Rwanda (cf. Vidal 2001). Perhaps the main reason for this is a concern about exclusion: genocide was not the only form of violence against civilians in 1994, there were also 'heterogeneous' victims of the civil war and post-genocide RPF abuses whose losses are not acknowledged publicly (Burnet 2009: 81). The fact that Hutu victims of genocide have also been increasingly marginalised, leads to conclusions that the memorials are 'politicizing victimhood' (Burnet 2009: 80) and constitute 'a form of symbolic violence' likely to have 'heavy consequences' by (Braumen et al. 2000: 13). However, making sense of the politics of commemoration, and its potential effects, calls for attention to mourning (Ashplant et al, 2006: 9) without which the

imperatives to remember the genocide and ongoing struggles over memory can be overlooked.

While methods differ, state initiatives to ground legitimacy through reference to the past are standard. National elites typically strive to shape representations of the past in their present interests, as studies in diverse contexts show (Werbner 1998; Davis, 2005; Gillis (ed) 1994). Casting new light on this impulse, Jenny Edkins argues that commemoration is a practice of concealment (Edkins 2003: xv) conceived to reconstitute sovereign power after mass violence and genocide. Genocide is the ultimate violation of trust and security, but such trauma, she argues, produces a rupture or political ‘openness’ in which commonsense is brought into question (Edkins 2006: 108). Trauma exposes the contingency of our socially constituted realities (Edkins 2003: 12) including the idea of the nation as the locus of security. States commemorate in order to repair the rupture and avert the challenge posed by trauma.

In this estimation, memorials are central to the foundation of political community, and to upholding a national order which rests on and perpetuates violence. But importantly, public remembrance is also a focus for civic activism and political critique. In particular, survivor testimony is seen to constitute a protest against sovereign power, exposing its inherent violence and implicitly demanding change. Survivors ‘do not want or cannot return to meanings that made sense before. They have to rebuild a different sense of personhood.’ (Edkins 2003: 58). This is the basis for tension between survivors and the state, examined by Edkins in a ‘western paradigm’ (2003: 10). It is at the root of the contestation over memorials, which has been observed principally but not exclusively in Europe and the United States (cf. Olick and Robbins 1998: 126). Memorialisation is regularly subject to, and infused with, political resistance, as reflected in Richard Werbner’s assessment that when the state seeks to appropriate past traumas, survivors demand the right to speak through “counter-appropriations” (Werbner 1998: 75).

## **Surviving the Genocide**

Rwandan survivors have suffered an unimaginable trauma. From April to July 1994, they were targeted in a genocide orchestrated by the state and carried out by local authorities, neighbours, colleagues, and sometimes even friends or relatives. The violence lasted 100 days and claimed a million lives.<sup>2</sup> The pretext for the genocide was the assassination of former President Juvénal Habyarimana, on 6 April 1994. But Hutu extremists who seized power at this moment were primed with a plan to eliminate all Tutsis and any Hutu political opponents. The new regime stoked up fear of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), which had launched a rebellion in 1990. National and local leaders mobilised anti-Tutsi sentiment, evoking a history of Hutu oppression. The atrocities were extensive, intimate and brutal—many of those who lived through the killing experienced rape, torture, physical injury or dispossession as well as the loss of family, friends, sometimes of entire communities (African Rights, 1995; Des Forges, 1999).

Rwandan survivors, as a group, are defined by their experiences of violence and loss during the genocide.<sup>3</sup> They share the condition of ‘traumatic bereavement’ (Sezibera, 2008) and their lives have also been affected in multiple other ways. They face a unique set of social and economic problems (Buckley-Zistel, 2006: 138); the genocide left many in poverty, isolation and ill health and they live with fear and anguish, as a minority in or near communities where former supporters of or bystanders to genocide reside (Ibuka 2007; African Rights 2008). Given their marginalisation, and the fact that the RPF victory brought an end to the genocide, it is questionable whether survivors could—or would wish to—present a political challenge to the new regime. Moreover, although Rwanda is officially a democracy since 2003, both prior to this and since, there has been limited scope for civic activism or political contestation (Reyntjens 2006). Despite these circumstances, survivors have struggled to win recognition for their losses, to testify and to shape public memory.

## **Memory Associations**

How and why survivors entered into the construction of public memory and the extent to which they counter official appropriations of the genocide remains to be

understood. My study of this question is based on participant observation and interviews with members of survivors groups and individuals active in memorialisation, or involved in the debates about memorials, because of personal losses or because of their expertise.<sup>4</sup> The interviewees are key informants, those most active in organising commemorations, raising funds to create memorials, working for the state or international agencies, or advising these agencies. They are not representative of survivors' views in a general sense. Not only are they generally 'elites', well-educated urban residents, but most are male in contrast with a majority of females in the survivor population (Rombouts, 2006: 7). However, they have a leading role and are therefore best placed to explain the scope and origins of survivor contributions to memorialisation. They are also able to provide wider insights: male elites were the principal target of the genocide and these survivors share a common experience of suffering and loss and social ties with other survivors, expressed in their membership of associations, networks and through the practice of memorialisation itself. They do not speak for survivors as a group, but they speak as survivors or bereaved relatives who have endured extreme loss and trauma and are committed to genocide memorialisation.

At the forefront of memorialisation are the survivors' associations. These groups began to emerge soon after the genocide, and even at this early stage they included memory among their objectives. They range from national associations to *ad hoc* local 'committees' established to create memorials or organise commemorations. Not all survivors join associations and even some of their members have no wish to contribute to public memory, they 'don't want their people to be remembered' (Teacher in Kanombe 2006) preferring to keep memories and mourning private. However, participation in commemoration, reburials and visits to memorial sites is common. Survivors associations promote participation and articulate a distinct perspective on memorialisation.

Survivors associations vary in their size and scope (Rombouts 2004). Ibuka, which means 'remember' in Kinyarwanda is the most prominent association involved in memorialisation at national and local levels. Founded in December 1995 to represent genocide survivors on issues of memory and justice, including social justice, it has a member of staff permanently working on memory issues and is active in all areas of

memorialisation. It has a leading role in organising commemorations, and helps smaller groups who construct and maintain the memorial sites. It lacks resources for this task because survivors have other needs and because, as a non-profit association, its funding is not stable—it depends on project-based funding from donors, support from the government and some donations from members. This means that it does not generally act independently but must ‘partner’ with other agencies in the making of memorials (Ibuka representative on memory 2006). The association also draws strength from its members, including two other national survivors’ groups, Avega, the genocide widows association, and AERG, the student survivors’ organisation.

Ibuka is a point of contact and coordination in memory work, and collaborates with other groups, but survivors associations do not work in a clear hierarchy or share a single perspective. There are differences within and disagreements between associations—with gaps between educated urban elites and isolated rural survivors, even if national associations have local branches, as Ibuka does (Rombouts 2004: 281-320). There have been tensions between national associations, for instance those arising out attempts by politicians to neutralise the critical potential of civil society (Rombouts, 2004: 292). In Rwanda, civic groups are subject to the influence of the state and shaped by social inequalities, as has been observed elsewhere (Abrahamsen 2000: 56). There are also overlaps between survivors, or bereaved returnees, and the state, with RPF members in ‘civil society’ and some survivors in local and national government. Nevertheless it is possible to identify a network of survivors, groups and individuals, making regular and significant contributions to the production of genocide memory and united in their commitment to this task.

### **Creating Memorials**

Survivors groups have called for and taken part in the creation of memorials, and made practical efforts to gather and treat or bury the remains of the dead. They have sometimes taken the lead in organising local commemorative ceremonies or constructing local memorial sites. They have lobbied the government, seeking to shape its memory policy and have used the platform of commemorations to draw attention to their plight. Their commitment exceeds that of the state: survivors groups



observe a period of mourning for 100 days between 7 April and 17 July, while officially genocide commemoration lasts only a week.

The involvement of survivors in creating memorials was dictated by the circumstances of the post-genocide period. After the killings, corpses were strewn across the hillside or buried in shallow mass graves, while the post genocide regime was preoccupied with other issues, including economic and social collapse and persistent insecurity (Prunier 1998). Often, survivors were left to look after the remains of the dead. Relatives wanted to find the remains of their loved ones and give them a 'decent burial'. They had to conform to a state edict that the victims should be buried in public cemeteries, rather than individually at home. But while the state allocated the land, disinterred bodies and built mass graves, survivors got together to try to improve and maintain burial sites and to make them into places of remembrance. Local genocide memorials were generally 'haphazard' initiatives of 'people doing it through sentimental reasons' (director of genocide memorials at the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture 2006).

A genocide burial ground and memorial constructed at Nyamasheke in 1995 was among the first such initiatives, setting a precedent to be followed elsewhere. Survivors and relatives of the dead formed a committee in Kigali, initially to try to find out what had happened to their loved ones. When they discovered the condition of the mass graves and the fact that many bodies were not yet buried, they determined to create a burial and memorial site. They got a financial contribution from the local administration and funding from the Ministry of Youth Sports and Culture, then in charge of genocide memory. They also turned to the survivors' association, Ibuka, for help and, later, managed to raise funds from a foreign NGO (president of the Nyamasheke memorial committee 2006).

Like the Nyamasheke committee, groups of survivors formed to improve, maintain or raise funds for the construction of local memorials. The result is that most districts now have at least one, and there are now thought to be around 500 in total (Ibuka representative on memory 2006). Survivors also helped to create national genocide memorials. Several of the six national memorials came into being partly through the efforts of survivors, including the memorials at Bisesero, Murambi and Nyamata. The

extent to which survivors were directly involved varied; they have worked in partnership with, been regulated by, or been dependent upon the state or international agencies. But survivor commitment has driven the creation and maintenance of memorials.

They lead committees, they organise meetings in the evenings. You see survivors getting together even with those from the diaspora or Hutus.... If one group of survivors see what has been done by groups in another area they say lets do something even better here. Let's do some fundraising... They don't have the means, but people want to tell what happened (Ibuka executive secretary 2006).

Less obviously, survivors have sought to influence state policy on remembrance. There are instances where they have succeeded, demanding the change of date for the official commemoration, from 1-7 April, as it originally was, to 7-14 April, as it now is (Gakwenzire, 2005: 6). There are other occasions where they have not managed to effect change, such as a failed attempt by a group of students, who were unable to convince the state to transform the Ntarama memorial, which was preserved in the condition it was found after the killings, with bodies of victims strewn around the church amid dirt and 'disorder' (AERG member 2006). From the perspective of survivors engaged in memory work, the government has often been on the back foot, neglecting memory policy, and delaying the formation the National Commission on the Fight against Genocide, anticipated in 2003 and eventually set up in 2008. The concerns have been two-fold. Firstly that the government does not take account of the views and needs of survivors in the development of memory policy: "they may prefer not to follow things up. It is very important to involve real survivors... The output has been regrettable" (AERG member 2006). Secondly that it has not given memory sufficient priority: "The government doesn't make an effort" (academic and former Ibuka representative 2007).

The fact that there are disputes between survivors groups and differences of opinion within them, and that there are contrasting views on memorials within the government (Ibreck 2009) means that the impact of survivor efforts to effect change is difficult to

measure. What is apparent is that survivors groups and many individual survivors have prominent roles in memorialisation, as Ibuka's executive secretary asserted:

Commemoration is above all an affair led by the victims. If there is one thing that survivors are involved in it is that. If the state doesn't want to do something, then we organise our own. If the mayor of a district doesn't agree... survivors will pursue it ... No one can tell us we can't do this. They have to let us mourn our loved ones.

Activism on the issue of genocide memory is at the root of survivor politics. Through memorialisation, and in collaborations and disputes with the government over memory, survivors contest their marginalisation in a more general sense, calling public attention to their past and present problems. 'The period of commemoration is an opportunity to give dignity to the victims and also to find out about people's economic and psychosocial situation... This is the opportunity for survivors to express themselves' (academic and former Ibuka representative 2006). This is apparent in national commemorations ceremonies when representatives of survivors' associations give speeches and individual survivors give testimony. During the annual commemoration in Murambi in 2007, an Ibuka spokesperson told the assembled crowd, including President Kagame, that survivors opposed a recent reduction of sentencing for confessed perpetrators in genocide trials (*gacaca*) and he called for greater assistance to alleviate the social and economic plight of survivors. A survivor from Mudasomwa then stood up to give an unrelenting account of the killings there. Survivor memories are, at least temporarily, at the centre of the political stage in annual commemorations, even though as one speaker pointed out 'when survivors go back home after testimony they have nothing'. It is not that survivors' testimonies are necessarily at odds with state discourses, indeed they may serve to support these—in Murambi in 2007 they condemned the French, resonating with the President's critique of their role in the genocide, and they praised their RPF rescuers. But simply by voicing their experiences of past and enduring suffering survivors condemn state violence and demand recognition of the rights and dignity of ordinary victims.

## Grief

Survivors gain a political platform through commemoration, yet this is not their original motivation. Memory work began as a response to loss and is first and foremost an expression of grief and a practice of mourning. Survivors expressed and sustained personal bonds with the dead through remembrance, as they tried to find ways to live with their loss. An architect explained how creating a memorial brought him close to the members of his family killed there: ‘When you work with memory you meet the victims’ (architect 2006). With so many dead and so few left to mourn them, private bereavement necessarily became a public matter. Survivors united around a shared experience and as a practical necessity, because the normal social arrangements surrounding bereavement had collapsed. Building a memorial became a community project, fulfilling a duty of care to the dead and the living: ‘for this community, to remember is an obligation’ (Bisesero survivor 2006). In part this was an extension of a universal response to loss: ‘I don’t know of any people who don’t cry for their dead’ (former teacher and member of the Nyamasheke memorialisation committee 2006). But the losses were extensive. After the genocide, memorialisation was neither a decision nor a choice for some—their bereavement was such that memory was all they had left.

Whether the government commemorates or not, I’m a victim. I lost 86 members of my family in the genocide. I know that I’m one of the lucky ones because I only lost my mother, father, sister and brother and I still have five siblings. I know families where no one is left. My auntie lost all her children. Wherever there is a commemoration she is always there. The government doesn’t call her to commemorate, they don’t even know her. But she goes because that is her life (former employee of the Kigali Memorial Museum 2006).

Survivor practices of remembrance are concerned with honouring the dead, as well as with grief—this is a particular concern in the aftermath of atrocities. Giving the victims a decent burial seemed imperative: ‘Survivors’ sense of relief began with the first burial. Although their relatives were killed inhumanely they are buried in a dignified way... It is way of healing for survivors, and the people who returned from

exile' (president of the Nyamasheke memorial committee 2006). Some participants related this to traditional religious beliefs in which the fortunes of the living depended upon attention to the spirits of the dead. A member of the Mugina memorial committee explained: 'According to Rwandese culture if you don't bury relatives they haunt you. This brings some relief.' When the bodies are not buried, restless and malicious spirits can be felt as a burden, haunting their relatives, according to a Rwandan psychiatrist, who has treated many survivors: 'allowing people to bury their loved ones means that they are no longer haunted.' A concern about spirits is not shared by all (Ibuka representative on memory 2006), in this overwhelmingly Christian society. But reburial is generally described as therapeutic—in the words of a female survivor: 'If you bury someone it's like a medicine you have taken' (employee of the Kigali memorial museum 2006). The desire for reburials is connected to a profound need to restore the dignity of the victims: 'The killers did everything they could to make sure their victims didn't die in dignity. To memorialise is to give to the dead' (journalist 2006).

Survivors created memorials out of grief and a sense of community. They regard remembrance as an ethical practice, and as a way to live with their losses and to begin healing. They also perceive reburial and remembrance as subversions of the ideas and methods of the genocide. This helps to explain why survivors first became involved, but it is important to emphasise that these original motives remain a stimulus. Survivor commitment persists because of the extent of human losses—more mass graves were found each year requiring more reburials<sup>5</sup>—and because of the extreme violence of the atrocities, which prolongs efforts to restore dignity and seek consolation. The intensity of mourning in Rwanda is a consequence of the scale and horror of survivors' bereavement.

## **Trauma**

Not all survivors want the genocide to be publicly commemorated; there are diverse opinions and emotional responses, at worst, memorials reawaken sorrow, anguish and trauma. As a Rwandan psychiatrist (2006) explained: 'it is important that there is a time to remember, but it must be organised so that we don't distress people. Even within families there are no agreements about this. There are some people who say

that is the past and we need to look to the future.’ Commemoration ceremonies have regularly been disrupted by survivors’ ‘traumatic crises’ (Gishoma & Brackelaire 2008) and visits to memorial sites can also trigger crises for survivors and other Rwandans. Trauma persists and, if anything, seemed to increase around the time of the tenth anniversary in 2004.<sup>6</sup> It is also affecting younger generations, including those too young to remember the atrocities. This was evident in interviews in Mubuga sector, Kibuye, where a local teacher had recently taken a class to visit the Bisesero memorial and pupils were traumatised when they realised their relatives died there. Survivors involved in creating memorials worry about such incidents of trauma, which at a minimum raise questions about the current forms and practices of memorialisation.

Yet forms and practices of memory which provoke distress are not just dictated by the state, they have also been influenced by survivors. In particular the displays of the bones of the victims of genocide in Rwanda’s memorial sites are controversial, and are apparently in contradiction with the survivors’ determination to honour and rebury the dead. For critics, this is confirmation of the RPF dominance of memorialisation ‘add[ing] to the past horror through the voyeurism of the corpses’ (Vidal, 2001: 45). Yet although survivor participants spoke of trauma and of the display of human remains as problems to be debated and needing resolution, beyond this there was no consensus on the matter. One survivor academic spoke of the need to consider the ‘moral and ethical questions’ raised by this ‘morally shocking’ practice; another spoke of the potentially traumatising and socially divisive effects of the displays: ‘We just wanted vestiges of the past to be conserved. But if we continue like this... there will be an impasse’. Yet neither insisted that the way forward was immediate reburial and most participants accepted that there had been a reason to display the bones, at least ‘for a while before burying them in dignity’ (psychiatrist 2006).

Survivors have often been responsible for gathering up the bones of the dead, washing them and setting them on display. They have continued to set aside some bones to be on public view, even where most are being buried (member of the Mugina memorial committee site 2006), despite concerns about trauma and the difficulties of preservation. Notably, survivors were involved in the preservation of a stark exposure of human torment, at the Murambi Genocide Prevention Centre, where entire corpses

of victims of the genocide are laid out on tables, preserved in lime in the tortured positions in which they died. Survivors were among the initial group who wanted to safeguard these remains as testimony and who worked to preserve them under the guidance of the director of the National Museum.

We began to clean the bodies and put salt on them. We had a team of around a dozen survivors (and some who came back in 1995) and we worked with them. We got advice from the Germans... We hired people among the survivors. We had 28 in the beginning and in the end it was 12. The survivors worked for free. They were not paid. They wanted to conserve the site. That was their motivation (national museum director 2006).

At Murambi and at other national and provincial memorial sites where bones are on view, interviewees emphasised that how the remains were looked after, not just whether or not they were displayed, was a critical issue. At the Bisesero site, survivors worried that the bones were decaying and were seeking support for their preservation. Several participants spoke of the condition of the Ntarama national memorial site—preserved in its original disorder, strewn with bones and traces of the dead. However none criticised the nearby Nyamata national memory site, where the bones have been cleaned and placed in orderly rows in underground burial chambers, opened for visitors to view. Survivors sought new solutions to the difficult problem of the bones; a local survivor living near the Ntarama site, upset by its condition, thought glass coffins might be an answer. Rather than a clear opposition to the displays, there was ongoing reflection:

Survivors feel people need to know... we need to find a compromise between burying and displaying. It is very difficult. We all want people to know; to show them the evidence. But we all want our people buried with the dignity they deserve (former employee of the Kigali Memorial Museum 2006).

The bones are regarded as the most powerful evidence of the atrocity, traces which can prevent forgetting and denial. In practice, this is not entirely borne out: as several interviewees mentioned, claims these were animal bones or the bones of Hutu victims of the RPF circulated in and outside Rwanda (leaving the bones exposed

could dispel the former if not the latter). Survivors want to obviate the need for these ‘museums of horror’ (academic 2006) by finding alternatives: participants called for the writing of detailed histories of local massacres, of further efforts to develop testimony and photographic records. In the meantime, their lack of a clear position is related not only to RPF support for the displays, which is itself not consistent (Ibreck 2009), but to the direct connection between the bones and the trauma of the genocide. Survivors feel compelled to give testimony about their experiences during the genocide, but their efforts to communicate the horror are limited by language. The rows of skulls and towers of bones, on display at massacre sites and the twisted skeletons of the victims of Murambi convey the trauma of genocide. The executive secretary of Ibuka, who survived the genocide in Bugesera by hiding in the marshes, explained:

I have a mission as a survivor to tell you what happened... They say a lot of things... They say the survivors are exaggerating; they say we are lying. I bear the traces. The bones will be the proof which will stop these denials.

### **Preventing genocide**

Survivor contributions to memorials are connected to an ongoing ‘fight against the ideology of genocide’ (academic 2006). In their own lifetimes, survivors have seen what happens when the victims of violence are not publicly remembered; their commitment to commemoration is built upon the experience of previous atrocities shrouded in fear and silence.<sup>7</sup> One participant recalled childhood memories of his mother’s unexplained lapses into sorrow and his later discovery that her mother and sisters were killed in the massacres of Tutsis in 1963; ‘I am living the same life’, he said ‘it is not possible to make a nation from forgetting. Remembering will help you go towards a better life (AERG member 2006). Another spoke of his view that state-imposed oblivion on Tutsi deaths after previous massacres was among the causes of the genocide: ‘the Tutsis had no right to demand the commemoration of those they lost... You were obliged to put yourselves in front of the person who had killed as if nothing happened. Then, after a few years, they committed genocide’ (Ibuka representative on memory policy 2006). This history has given weight to the view that remembrance is essential: ‘Memory can help to combat genocide’ (former Bisese



councillor 2006); ‘Memory is the real way forward... If we don’t remember it will happen again’ (employee of the Kigali memorial museum 2006). These fears need to be understood in relation to past violence, the recent persecution of survivor witnesses in *gacaca* trials, and targeting of Tutsis in the Great Lakes region.<sup>8</sup>

The social and political effects of memory, its potential impact upon survivors and their relations with other Rwandans, were considerations which shaped the interviewees’ participation in memorialisation. There was an acute awareness that attitudes towards survivors, nationally and internationally, are influenced by representations of the genocide. This underpinned a belief that memory can contribute to genocide prevention. But while the idea of memory as ‘never again’ is in line with state discourse, it has also led to critiques of the official approach. In interviews which predated the official renaming from the ‘Rwandan’ to ‘Tutsi’ genocide in 2008, (and help to explain this shift) participants called for specific recognition of Tutsi victimhood. While accepting that ethnic groups in Rwanda are historically ‘a construct,’ one interviewee pointed out that the genocide targeted ‘a known group: the Tutsis and those related to them; failure to recognise that is to erase memory’ (journalist 2006). Another advocate for the ‘genocide against the Tutsis’ label argued that the purpose is to reflect the intention of the perpetrators, not to deny the fact that Hutus were killed: ‘[the perpetrators sought] to eliminate the human beings called Tutsis and those who have the same physique, ideology or understanding’ (employee of the Kigali memorial museum 2006).

Survivors’ lives have been defined by their ‘Tutsi’ identity: ‘[they] have in effect been persecuted for having been born a Tutsi... failure to recognise that is to erase memory... not mentioning their Tutsi identity is equivalent to being dispossessed of their history’ (Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace 2006: 68). This was a Tutsi genocide, a female survivor from Nyamata argued, because Hutus killed in the genocide had effectively become Tutsis, rejecting the notion of an exclusive ‘Hutu’ identity which animated the killers: ‘we don’t consider them [genocide victims] Hutu; they suffered like we suffered’ (employee of the Kigali memorial museum 2006). Some interviewees did not see it as a priority to win specific recognition for Tutsi victims, putting greater emphasis on the need to find ways to ‘unite people’ through remembrance (AERG member 2006). But the aims of gaining recognition for victims

as Tutsis and of forging closer relations with other Rwandans were not generally seen as distinct or incompatible. There was a view that reconciliation, or at least peaceful coexistence, could only be accomplished by promoting the truth about the genocide: ‘We need unity and reconciliation but not badly interpreted, founded on the meaning of the genocide’ (Ibuka representative on memory 2006).

A belief that memorials were a mode of truth-telling and education which could serve as the foundation for a better future informs survivor activities. Participants wanted memory to contribute to the making of a more inclusive society, and to promote peace. Several spoke of their hope that eventually all Rwandans would join the survivors in attending commemorations and visiting sites of memory. Progress is measured by participation and the fact that young Hutus were increasingly involved was seen as a positive step forward (Ibuka representative responsible for memory 2006). It was generally understood that further efforts were needed to make memory serve this ambition. One interviewee suggested that more must be done to record and celebrate the memory of the Hutu resisters, something which Ibuka began doing in 2001: ‘We need to tell the whole story. We are learning from day to day about the genocide. Not everyone killed... The names of heroes need to be remembered’ (architect 2006). Another considered whether it might eventually be possible for returnees from Congo to be given a chance to testify at commemorations about their suffering the camps (former resident of Nyamasheke 2006).

Perhaps most surprisingly, given all they have endured, some interviewees perceived that transforming relations among Rwandans and between them and the state also required personal changes. They described their efforts to overcome fear and hostility, and to recognise the suffering of others. It was not that they expected other survivors to make similar efforts to move beyond fear and anger, a former Ibuka representative acknowledged the difficulties of ‘trying to contain emotions because of losses during the genocide.’ A survivor and former employee of the Kigali memorial museum suggested that it might be necessary for the state to regulate commemoration because survivors cannot be expected to transcend their emotions. And yet, this survivor’s own capacity for understanding suggested otherwise. He spoke of his work with genocide prisoners, how he forged relationships with them, and how this led him to accept that ‘killers are human beings’. Similarly, another participant described how

his involvement in creating a memorial has helped to ease his mind, including coping with his discovery that his mother's killer was his former primary school classmate: 'The real forgiveness is in the memorial.' Finding ways to remember and to live peacefully in the community was described as part of an internal battle against the genocide: 'To be a génocidaire is not in the face, it is in the heart: anyone who doesn't accept another may be a génocidaire' (architect 2006). Several interviewees argued that a clear distinction must be made between victims of genocide and those who suffered in war, exile or vengeance killings, but they also recognised the need for some acknowledgement of these other episodes of suffering. One participant for commemorations to include these other victims: 'All this society is sick, shocked, traumatised. We have all lost' (president of the Nyamasheke committee 2006).

## **Conclusion**

After the genocide, survivors were described as the 'walking dead'; many felt life had no meaning and could barely imagine the person they were before 1994 (Hatzfeld, 2005: 83). While their lives continue to be scarred by the atrocities, a group of survivors and relatives of the dead have devoted themselves to memorialisation as an expression of their enduring commitment to the dead and to each other. Survivors remind us that memorials are created to mourn and honour the dead (Winter 1995) even if they are also employed politically to promote legitimacy or nationalism. Their initiatives illustrate survivors' political agency after mass death and its connection to memory (Edkins 2003).

Survivor involvement in the creation of genocide memorials in Rwanda resonates with an account of a survivor politics of memory, based on western examples (Edkins 2003), while raising some new questions. Survivors experiences of trauma and loss, inform their efforts to honour the dead and to influence state approaches to memorialisation. At times they have challenged the dominant narrative; invariably they call attention to the past and present suffering of ordinary victims of state violence. Ultimately, the survivors struggle for social and political change. But in Rwanda, we cannot assume the coherence of survivor interventions, since only a few representatives gain a public hearing, there are differences within this group and between them and other survivors,<sup>9</sup> and state interests and survivors concerns can

sometimes intersect. It is not clear that survivor engagement can effectively challenge state dominance; it is also possible that public remembrances of grief and trauma have some negative impacts: responses to memorials include contrasting examples trauma or healing, of participation or resentment (Longman and Rutagengwa 2006). What is striking, however, is that survivors are tenacious and dedicated participants in memory production; they 'want to remember traumatic events in all their affront to meaning and to sense and are unwilling to see them encapsulated in common platitudes' (Edkins 2003: 73).

For Rwandan genocide survivors, memorialisation was a reaction to the genocide. It arose out of loss and trauma and became part of their everyday existence. The bereaved joined together to remember because they were grieving for the loss of loved ones and empathized with the losses of others. They displayed their ethical commitment to others, 'the ties of mutuality' (Booth, 2006: 98) felt within a community and enduring beyond death. Their involvement was also purposeful, intended to expose the truth of the atrocities of 1994, to gain recognition and to prevent genocide. As such survivor engagement in the construction of genocide memorials is distinct from, and sometimes at odds with, the state impulse to employ memorials to consolidate its power. Survivors' intrinsic concerns are in tension with efforts to instrumentalize genocide memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Tutsis were the principal targets of the genocide. Hutus were killed either deliberately as political opponents, moderates, or resisters of genocide and some or inadvertently, since identities were complex and communities mixed. The categories of Hutu and Tutsi are politically constructed. The historical origins of these identities is debated (Uvin 2001) but the notion of difference which informed the perpetrators of genocide had its roots in colonial racial thought and policy (Mamdani 2001).

<sup>2</sup> This estimate is based on the statistics given by the Government of Rwanda but some argue for lower estimates (cf. Straus, 2006: 51).

<sup>3</sup> The 'survivor' label has been in general use in Rwanda since the genocide and applies mainly to Tutsis who either experienced and escaped the genocide, or whose immediate families lived in Rwanda in 1994 while they were temporarily abroad. A recent census at over 300,000 but estimates vary and not all victims of the genocide fit within this category, which can marginalise 'complex inter-ethnic cases' (Rombouts 2004: 220) or exclude Hutu victims, among them Hutu widows. Burnet (2009) provides further insight into the complexities.

<sup>4</sup> The research was part of a PhD project involving fieldwork in Rwanda in 2006 and 2007, including in depth interviews with 42 key informants and participant observation. I refer to interviewees cited in this article as survivors since overwhelmingly they fit within or refer to this category, as defined above, although some are bereaved relatives or 'returnees' (Rwandan Tutsis who returned from exile after the victory of the RPF). While in general 'returnees' are seen as a distinct group, potentially at odds with survivors (Prunier, 2009: 3) in this instance they are either integrated into the 'survivor community' as a result of their profession, or because they also experienced traumatic losses through the genocide. I have cited the interviewees according to their roles, rather than their names, since these are central to

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the analysis. It is important to note that among the interviewees was Professor Célestin Kanimba, director of the National Museum, the key partner of the state in the preservation of memorial sites whose writing on this topic is also cited. Also significant is the fact that while individual Hutus, mostly state officials, can and do get involved in memory work they are in a minority—only one of my interviewees was a Hutu, targeted in the genocide because he protected Tutsis.

<sup>5</sup> Ibuka, 2007 estimates that 90% of the victims have now been found and buried (2007: 30).

<sup>6</sup> One possible explanation is that trauma is an underlying condition affecting survivors' everyday lives (Gishoma & Brackelaire, 2008; Sezibera 2008) and occasionally manifest in crises. Such crises are triggered not only by commemorations, but also other reminders, including encounters with genocide perpetrators and the *gacaca* genocide trials (Brounéus, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> There were large scale massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda before the genocide, including in 1959, in the early 1960s and 1973 (Straus, 2006: 175).

<sup>8</sup> Ibuka estimates that there have been more than 150 attacks on survivors since 1995 (*The New Times*, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that attitudes towards commemoration among survivors in general are diverse and may be related to present circumstances as well as past experiences. See Longman and Rutagengwa (2006: 251) which highlights a variety of views from survivors.

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